"THE ALGORITHM IS YOUR MOM": PLAYFUL ALGORITHMIC AGENCY IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC FELLA ORGANIZATION

Kateryna Kasianenko
Queensland University of Technology

Olga Boichak
The University of Sydney

Introduction

Algorithms of digitally networked platforms have invited an extensive critique for their obscure, biased, or extractive nature (Eubanks, 2019; Noble, 2018). However, recent studies (Bonini & Treré, 2024) call for enriching such critique with a consideration of user agency. The ability to influence "the outcome of algorithmic computation for [one's] benefit" (ibid., p. 2) by making sense of algorithms (Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017), helps users regain control over one's actions (Bonini & Treré, 2024), or repair harms and biases in algorithmic systems (Velkova & Kaun, 2021).

In their conceptualisation of algorithmic agency, Bonini and Treré (2024) advocate for disbanding of the divide between "optimisation" and "gaming", upheld by social media platforms to prohibit user engagement in "illegal" practices. This idea of purposeful play which explores algorithms' inner workings to regain control over their outcomes (Mendonça et al., 2023) echoes Galloway's (2006) notion of an *allegorithm*. An *allegorithm* is a sense-making tool – as players move through digital environments, they create sociotechnical imaginaries on the inner workings and "rules" of the game and what it takes to achieve their objectives.

Our paper contributes to this scholarship by exploring playful engagement with algorithmic systems among members of the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO). NAFO are an international social movement that emerged on Twitter in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Kasianenko & Boichak, 2024). Its members, or *fellas*, are recognisable by their avatars featuring a shiba dog. They engage in ridiculing and debunking Russian propaganda and disinformation and crowdfunding for the Ukrainian military. The community is one of the most notable examples of playful

practices of countering Russia's full-scale invasion on digital media platforms (Tokariuk, 2023).

This study uses mixed methods to understand how NAFO make sense of the algorithmic environment of Twitter – their primary site of operation, and how their understanding of algorithms affects their daily participation in activism. We examine the community's practices, or *allegorithms*, through the prism of playful activism (Cervi & Divon, 2023).

Figure 1. A collage showcasing avatars of some of the NAFO members

We combine insights from qualitative textual analyses of a sample from over 4 million tweets with 25 semi-structured interviews with NAFO members. Twitter data was collected between May 2022 and May 2023 using the Academic API v2, and the interviews were recorded between February and December 2023. Our approach for filtering tweets for close reading was informed by Bucher's (2017) keyword-based sampling procedure for Twitter posts mentioning "algorithm". Interview participants were asked to reflect on their tactics of Twitter usage and memorable posts related to Russia's invasion (see Robards & Lincoln, 2019 for description of this approach).

Our findings reveal that fellas understand Twitter's algorithm as both an instrumental and an antagonistic entity. Their self-professed status as an algorithmic actor reclaims power in a fragmented and increasingly hostile environment of Twitter. Below, we summarise three key ways through which NAFO understand Twitter's algorithm.

Twitter algorithm as a "tool"

To counter Russian propaganda, it is important for NAFO to be able to fight their adversaries without algorithmically increasing their visibility. Fellas also regularly run fundraisers, with some established techniques for enhancing their visibility – from adding a short reply with an image (a practice called "boosting") to sharing personal or emotional stories to attract attention first, and adding a fundraiser link in replies.

Which affordances of Twitter do, or do not, increase visibility, are a constant point for interest and discussion. Fellas share practical tips for controlling algorithmic visibility such as avoiding following pro-Russian accounts and taking screenshots of them instead, as well as adding them to a list and muting them. Threads explaining this are often peppered with memes and jokes – a staple of NAFO vernacular. It is a common belief among NAFO and their supporters that humour is one of the ways to be "promoted" by the algorithm, which highlights the playful, subversive nature of the online collective.

Figure 2. An infographic combining memes with instructions for achieving higher algorithmic visibility

NAFO are not alone in their instrumental engagement with Twitter's algorithms – their adversaries (i.e., pro-Kremlin accounts) often attempt to attract NAFO's attention to benefit from potential increase in visibility. Calling out these attempts in a playful way is the primary response from fellas.

Twitter algorithm as an "enemy"

It is not only Russian propagandists that NAFO are up against. Since late 2022, fellas have been noticing a decrease of Ukraine making it to Twitter's trends, as well as difficulties of finding other fellas. In NAFO's posts, the notion of "the algorithm" is often discursively connected with the figure of Elon Musk, whose flippant and increasingly pro-Russian stance has been endangering Ukraine's fight beyond Twitter (Boichak & Lokot, 2022). NAFO came up with various humorous nicknames for the billionaire, such as "Elon Muscovite". This personification of the algorithm not as a "God-like entity" (Glatt, 2022), but as an authority that can be argued with, resisted, and ridiculed, is what enables NAFO to continue changing their tactics and maintain a presence on the platform.

Figure 3. NAFO's meme mocking Musk's alignment with Russian propaganda

Play is an important part of other forms of resistance towards the algorithm – from bravado-laden reports of being in and out of "Twitter jail" to gallows humour about being

"deboosted". Play sustains NAFO's tactical efforts that are not devoid of moral conundrums of needing to simultaneously work with and against Twitter's algorithms.

NAFO as an algorithmic entity

The most playful and distinct form of NAFO's engagement with the idea of Twitter's algorithms is their reclaiming of a status of an algorithmic entity for themselves. In a fuzzy environment of Twitter, NAFO are often dismissed as "bots" by their adversaries. As the below post showcases, in such exchanges, reclaiming the status asserts NAFO's power not only to their adversaries, but to other fellas who follow NAFO-related hashtags.

> Surprised bots have a sense of humour? [redacted] produces bloody good algorithms.
> #fellas #NAFO
>
> So you've met NAFO for the first time?? 😂 They are programmed to appear when people tweet something really dumb. That's the algorithm👍

NAFO's playful reclaiming of the notions of algorithms or bots extends scholarly understanding of accepted ways of activism on a platform where user-led responses are increasingly the only way to address Russian propaganda.
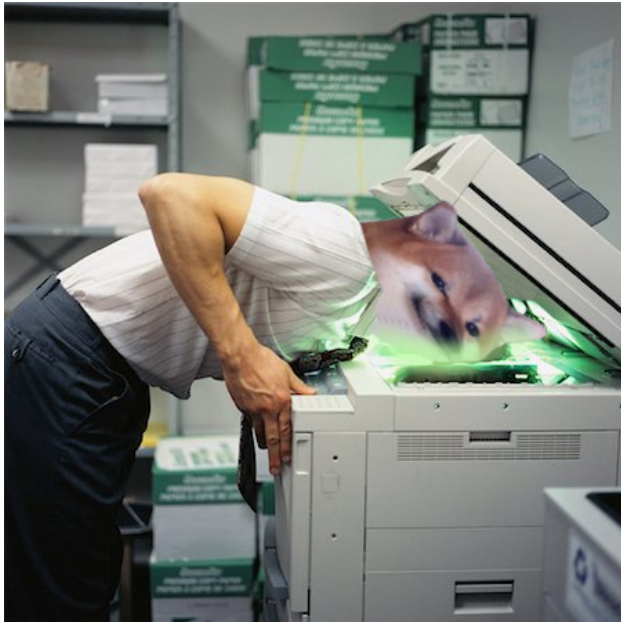

Figure 4. NAFO's meme playing with the idea of fellas as an algorithmic entity.

Conclusion

This study deepens understanding of algorithmic agency that arises in the process of *allegorithmic* play. Instead of seeing algorithms as adversarial or omnipotent, fellas engage in playful vernacular practices to reclaim their agency over the information ecosystem. They might not succeed in fully understanding or rewriting the "rules of the

game", but nonetheless achieve their objective of propagating civic ideas to ever-increasing international audiences. With the growing interest in harms that arise from online humour and memes, it is important to continue investigating digitally (and algorithmically) mediated collectives such as NAFO, who use a variety of humorous practices to support the victims of Russian aggression. As scholars, we should not lose sight of what play enables users to do in algorithmically mediated environments as they tactically reclaim tools for their activism.

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